

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 438 756

HE 032 642

AUTHOR Parker, D. Randall
TITLE Teaching, Learning, and Working with International Students: A Case Study.
PUB DATE 1999-11-17
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (28th, Point Clear, AL, November 17-19, 1999).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; College Students; Communication Skills; Consciousness Raising; Cultural Awareness; Cultural Differences; Culture Conflict; Educational Environment; Foreign Countries; *Foreign Students; Graduate Students; Higher Education; *International Educational Exchange; Student Adjustment; *Student Exchange Programs; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Taiwan

ABSTRACT

This case study of a program for Taiwanese students at Louisiana Tech University examined the challenges and rewards of working with international students. Data for the study come from the literature on international education, interviews with Taiwanese graduate students in the program, observations of classes, personal reflections of the researcher, and interviews with participating faculty. Challenges included coping with students' culture shock and language limitations, determining students' experiential base, and helping students adjust to the academic environment and requirements of a U.S. university. The Taiwanese students had to cope with concepts of individualism versus competition (students tended to be competitive and have difficulty engaging in collaborative learning activities), equality and informality (many found the informal academic setting unsettling and were uncomfortable asking repeated questions), different reasoning styles (students tended to be task oriented, an approach not conducive to development of critical thinking), time versus process orientation (students found techniques such as discovery learning inappropriate), and plagiarism. Rewards and advantages of the experience included the building of cross-cultural awareness and the development of greater cultural and global understanding among faculty and students. Another advantage was the improvement of communication and socialization skills of faculty and students through discourse and informal conversations. (Contains 11 references.) (SM)

Teaching, Learning, and Working with International Students: A Case Study

D. Randall Parker Ed.D.
Louisiana Tech University
Doctorp@latech.edu

A paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
Mid-South Educational Research Association

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as
received from the person or organization
originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to
improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this
document do not necessarily represent
official OERI position or policy.

November 17-19, 1999
Point Clear, Alabama

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND
DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFORM
AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC
COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY
HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

D.R. Parker

Teaching, Learning, and Working with International Students: A Case Study

American institutions of higher education have historically been attractive to international students seeking initial and advanced degrees and, in recent years, the number of people seeking educational experiences outside their native land has been increasing. A report by the Institute of International Education cites that in 1997-98, there were 481,280 foreign students enrolled on U. S. campuses. This represents a 5.1 percent increase over the previous year and almost a third of all students from around the world who are studying abroad (Goodman, 1999). Whether they come as part of an exchange program, as a cohort of students, or as individuals, having international students on our campuses, in our classes, and in our communities can be both challenging and rewarding. This is true not only for our international students, but also for American students and for the faculty who teach these classes and work with international students. This paper reports both the challenges and rewards of such experiences, for both faculty and students, through the use of a case study of one program for international students from Taiwan at Louisiana Tech University and from the literature on international education. The concluding position is that the benefits to all concerned outweigh the challenges and potential difficulties of working with international students. The content of this paper is most appropriate and applicable for those working with undergraduate and graduate international students but may, in part, be generalized to the P-12 setting, especially if one works with recent immigrants or large numbers of ESL students.

The Case Study Site

Louisiana Tech University is a comprehensive institution offering bachelors, masters and doctorate degrees and is located in North Central Louisiana. The university has an enrollment of over 10,000 students and, in 1998, had an international student enrollment of 3 percent. Beginning in the fall of 1996, arrangements were made between the university and the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Taiwan to identify and admit Taiwanese students who possessed a bachelors degree from an institution of higher education in Taiwan and who wished to pursue a masters degree in physical education from Louisiana Tech. Students were admitted as a cohort and enrolled in concurrent, sequenced degree courses over a fifteen-month period. To date we have admitted five cohorts, of which four have completed the program. Members of cohort five are scheduled to graduate in the 1999-2000 academic year. Enrollment in each cohort has ranged from 12 to 24 students. Students ranged in age from 24 to 45 years of age.

Courses for each cohort were taught, as an overload, by faculty who regularly taught such courses in the regular MS program and who volunteered to be part of this program. All students carried full time, graduate courseloads of 9 to 12 hours per quarter. In addition, an interpreter was provided for each class meeting, the faculty met regularly with students outside of class to answer questions and develop research projects in physical education, and American students enrolled in the College of Education's ESL Certification Program served as additional tutors in Conversational and Academic English. In addition to holding a bachelors degree, students admitted to

the program possessed skill, performance and teaching/coaching experience in a particular sport such as (a) basketball, (b) judo, (c) interpretive dance, (d) weightlifting, (e) tennis, (f) table tennis, or (g) volleyball.

Methodology

Data and comments contained in this paper are drawn from the literature on international students and from open ended interviews with the Taiwanese graduate students in the program. In addition, observations of classes, personal reflections of the author and interviews with colleagues who have taught in this program and who, together, have taught, advised, and guided the research projects of the Taiwanese students in the five cohorts were used to collect data. Data from the literature and the research site were analyzed using a constant-comparative method and content analysis to determine and triangulate the themes that emerged.

Findings and Results

Results of this analysis yielded categories of challenges for success, as well as, rewards and benefits of the experience for both students and faculty. The major findings of this study are as follows.

Challenges

International student enrollment on most campuses involves students being integrated into and included in regular university classes. In some cases, cohorts of international students are enrolled together and matriculate through a program as a group. Regardless of the approach and structure of the schedule, there are some

unique challenges presented to both faculty and students. Our experience set these Taiwanese students in cohort classes, taught by university faculty, with the assistance of an interpreter in each class, and additional English tutors provided through our ESL program. We found that this arrangement induced a considerable amount of interaction between students and faculty in class. The presence of the interpreter seemed to encourage the depth and scope of student questions and responses when they did not always have to fully respond in English.

Perhaps the most initially frustrating challenge for both faculty and for international students is a sense of "culture shock" which can lead to feelings of confusion, anger, or even despair (Schnell, 1990). Academic and social expectations may differ and, even though the individual wants to be successful, he may not initially be able to adjust to the setting. Misunderstanding of cultural background and prior academic experience may lead to role confusion and frustration.

One of our biggest hurdles was to determine the experiential base of our students. Although they were skilled in their respective sports, it was sometimes difficult for us to fully understand how their experiences in Taiwan compared to those of American Graduate students. We spent considerable time with each cohort exploring the differences and commonalties between the American and Taiwanese P-12 and undergraduate educational systems. We found that, even though the systems were similar in time span and general curriculum, we could not assume these students to be familiar with learning theories or a variety of teaching styles.

Robinson (1992) has noted that international students often have difficulty adjusting to the academic environment of American institutions of higher education. Several areas of concern, identified in the literature, also emerged through our experience and are noted as follows:

Individualism vs Competition: Students may come from an environment that encourages competition and may be accustomed to assuming that the only way they can succeed is to do more than others. They may seek to conform to what they understand is expected of them to the point that individual thought and discourse is reduced or abandoned.

We found that our students performed well individually on both performance assessments of physical education activities and on paper and pencil tests. However, there was a great sense of competitiveness among the students and they required much coaxing and explanation to engage in collaborative and cooperative learning activities or in group projects which were to be assessed. They all exhibited a genuine and determined work ethic, but they were, as a group, unfamiliar with designing or assessing cooperative group activities. In addition, many of them were so concerned with getting the "right" answer that it was sometimes difficult to expand the depth of understanding of concepts or skills.

Equality and Informality: Students may find the informality of some academic settings unsettling. They may come from a culture where it is inappropriate for students to develop any personal rapport with faculty, and they may feel uneasy being more than passive receivers of the written or spoken word: the teacher presents the information

and the student receives it. This concept may be in conflict with the instructional techniques of faculty that see to facilitate learning and work toward developing a community of learners.

We discovered that our students felt uncomfortable asking repeated questions if they did not understand a concept or technique demonstrated by the faculty. They reported that they felt it was their task to grasp the information and they felt embarrassed when the instructor had to repeat directions or instruction. They wanted the instructor to present the information, usually in lecture/discussion format, after which they would study and memorize the material. In their conversations with faculty they were always respectful but it took a long time for them to begin to develop any personal rapport with the faculty. Through receptions, cookouts and other social activities, we began to develop relationships with individuals and attempted to introduce an aspect of informality and collegiality to the group.

Pragmatism vs Reasoning Style: Some students may be so task oriented that they ignore developing alternate reasoning styles and concentrate only on the most efficient way to master the task at hand. Though effective in task accomplishment, this approach may not be conducive to developing critical thinkers and students may have difficulty in decision making at higher order levels.

We found these students to be extremely task oriented. They all displayed a determined work ethic and came to class prepared. We did, however, struggle with getting them to think and perform beyond the knowledge/recall level in academic tasks.

While they understood the information, many had difficulty in applying the information to varied situations and in designing creative or multiple solutions to problems.

Time vs Process Oriented: In seeking the most efficient way to grasp material, students may be confused in settings where the process is valued as much, or more, than the actual product. Instructional techniques such as discovery learning may seem inappropriate and inefficient to them.

Since the students were very task oriented, it was difficult for us to engage them in instructional techniques beyond lecture and demonstration. Again, they wanted to know the specific task and the most efficient way to accomplish the task.

Plagiarism/Knowledge Ownership: Students with limited English skills may understand the concept of plagiarism but may still have difficulty applying this concept to their work. Though well intentioned, they may seek to use well-written work as a substitute for their own words. This may well be more a function of language than intent.

This was, perhaps, our biggest academic challenge. These students, with limited English proficiency, had difficulty in distinguishing between direct quotes and other types of citations. It was not uncommon to find whole passages taken word for word from texts without reference or acknowledgement. When confronted, the students would genuinely attempt to rewrite the passage or cite the quote, but many times the limitations of language and translation confounded the intent and clarity of the writing.

We all spent much time in individual conferences to improve the writing skills of these students. Reid (1997) notes that many international students need guided and consistent help in developing academic writing skills and in the writing process.

Many of our students did not see the appropriateness or need of multiple drafts and were unfamiliar with our expectations in writing processes of (a) prewriting, (b) planning, (c) conference groups, or (d) peer review. Almost all needed continued and guided assistance with grammar, punctuation and writing in a clear, concise style. However, we feel this dilemma was mostly a function of language.

Lee (1997) notes that, as part of the writing process, many students who can write conversational English very well, may have difficulty in writing academic and scholarly prose and that they may need help with the content and organization of research and scholarly reports. We found this to be the case with most all of our cohort students. Research proposals and literature reviews went through many revisions under the patient instruction and guidance of the faculty. In order for these students to produce quality written work in English, it was necessary for the faculty to commit a great deal of time to working with them outside of class.

Accommodations and Special Considerations

There are several additional challenges of working with international students that emerged from this study. Many of our cohort students reported having difficulty listening to and following extended lectures or conversations. As a result, much material needed to be repeated, rephrased or reviewed for comprehension. Related to this, some students who were able to comprehend the spoken English still had difficulty asking questions due to limited English oral communication skills. Conversations tended to take a great deal of time and faculty (often working through the interpreter)

had to ask many questions in order to help students rephrase their thoughts and comments. These findings are consistent with those of McKnight (1994).

Schweers (1993) reported that in technical, research oriented, or pedagogical courses, international students may lack sufficient vocabulary to phrase coherent questions or comments. We found this to often be the case. The acquisition of new and unfamiliar English words (particularly those regarding research and research design) required extended time and patience on the part of both students and faculty. Although students could read the material, comprehension of specific statistical techniques and reports required repeated and conscientious effort. In their written work (research proposals, article critiques, and literature reviews) some students also had difficulty distinguishing between the use of general (conversational) English and the vocabulary and style of specific, academic written and spoken English.

In addition to academic needs, international students also need assistance to be incorporated into the university and the surrounding community. Counseling services and extended academic advising need to be available for these students (Moore, 1987). Perhaps foremost, we learned that faculty must view international students as individuals who have unique, though sometimes, challenging needs and who should be treated as individuals.

To address these challenges, we found that we needed to make adjustments in both teaching and in the organization of learning experiences. Faculty teaching styles were adjusted or varied (shorter, but more frequent lectures) and the pace of lectures was adjusted to meet student needs. Since the cohort classes met outside the regular

academic schedule, we found that we could adjust the frequency of classes for these groups. Faculty often extended the total meeting time of cohort classes to allow for review and time to accommodate translations through the interpreter. These students also needed more time to complete written assignments and their work had to go through more revisions and drafts than did the work of our regular, American students. In our cohort classes, notes and handouts were translated into the native language, we utilized the services of tutors and an interpreter and exams were sometimes also translated into Chinese. Students were required to present oral presentations in English, but accommodations were made for the use of the interpreter in addressing follow up questions from the faculty. To facilitate these adjustments, we implemented of inservice sessions for the faculty and staff who regularly worked with the cohorts.

Rewards and Advantages of the Experience

The rewards and advantages of having these students on our campus and in our classes manifest themselves for both the individual faculty member and American students, as well as for our institution. While many of these advantages can be considered intrinsic to the experience of faculty, students and the learning community, some extrinsic rewards have been identified. Perhaps the greatest advantage for both individuals and institutions is the building of cross-cultural awareness and the development of greater cultural and global understanding (Keith, 1992; Council of Graduate Schools, 1991). The higher education environment should be one of inquiry and tolerance and the presence of international students provides opportunity for discourse and discovery. Faculty who have worked with these cohorts have become

more aware of their culture-bound assumptions and develop a more inclusive view of learning and community. Our experience with these students has allowed us to learn more of the customs and language of their native country as well as the chance to incorporate information about and understandings of their culture into course content and instruction. When working with these students, we have become aware of such activities as the Chinese New Year celebrations or the Taiwanese Double Ten (October 10) Independence Holiday. On the other hand, we had to take time to explain to them the meaning and traditions of such occasions as Halloween or St. Patrick's Day that we sometimes assumed they understood. There was also great consternation on the part of these students when they realized that one could not buy and discharge fireworks year round, as is the case in Taiwan. This same assumption can also be carried over to school and team sports (they tended to find American football slow paced and boring), American economic and marketing systems, and an understanding of and ability to navigate through the intricacies of institutional bureaucracy. We found that we were much more than "schedule advisors" in that we fielded questions ranging from Cajun cooking to how to get a driver's license. We also learned about Chinese cooking and "snack foods" such as "Rice Jell-O". A final advantage that emerged was the improvement of communication and socialization skills of faculty and students through discourse and informal conversations. Our faculty made an effort to learn to speak some Mandarin phrases and even a few words spoken by their professor in their native language seemed to go far in building community and relationships.

For institutions of higher education, the rewards of having international students on campus manifest themselves in the form of increased academic standards and rigor. Potts (1992) reports that many international students have very strong scholastic and academic records that tend to increase the overall academic standings of departments and institutions. Our students possessed such academic records and exhibited quality work in these programs, albeit that the accommodations of time and faculty workload were considerable. In addition, having a large group or cohort of international students had a positive impact on our full time graduate enrollment since these students come to our institution on a full time basis.

For both the academic community and the local communities in which institutions are located, the presence of international students is usually a long-term experience. These students tend to be enrolled full time, live in the community for longer periods of time, and gain employment during the time there are in our communities. In addition to the direct financial contributions to the institutions, the economic benefits of the presence of international students can impact the entire community. Our cohort students lived in our community for 15 months, several were employed locally, and all gave us an experience in cultural understanding.

Conclusion

Although there are many challenges to working with international students, we believe that the benefits of having these students on our campus and in our classes far outweigh the challenges. The experience has provided us with opportunities to adjust

and improve instruction, broaden our cultural understanding, enriched our vocabularies, and enlightened us to the perceptions and experiences those who may, in some ways, be perceived as different from ourselves. The presence of these students has added to the diversity and uniqueness of our institution as we seek to develop learning communities. In some ways, we feel we have learned as much from them as they have learned from their American university experience.

References

Council of Graduate Schools (1991) *International graduate students: A guide for graduate deans, faculty, and administrators*. Washington, DC: Author

Goodman, A. E. (March 12, 1999). America is devaluing international exchanges for students and scholars. The Chronicle of Higher Education, XLV (27), A56.

Keith, K. M. (1992). *Global understanding and international students*. Paper presented at the Spring Conference of the National Association of Foreign Student Advisors. Honolulu:HI (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No: ED409763)

Lee, D. S. (1997). What teachers can do to relieve problems identified by international students. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 70. 93-100.

McKnight, A. (1994). *The business of listening at university*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Baltimore: MD. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No: ED374663).

Moore, J. W. (1987). *Understanding, advising, and teaching international students: A handbook for faculty*. Portland, OR: Western Oregon Press.

Potts, J. D. (1992). *International students: An impact analysis*. Washington, DC: Association of International Educators.

Reid, J. M. (1997). Which non-native speaker? Differences between international students and U.S. residents. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 70. 17-27.

Robinson, J. (1992). International students and American university culture: Adjustment issues. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No: ED350968)

Schnell, J. A. (1990). The multicultural classroom: Working to create opportunities out of possible obstacles. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No: ED320175).

Schweers, W. C. (1993). *Academia, English, and the international student*. New York: Columbia University. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No: ED320175)